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Six members of Congress from the region - and a former member who's running for Senate - diagnosed the maladies of the health-care system and proposals to overhaul it during a town-hall forum today that demonstrated the difficulty of finding a consensus on the subject.

Three Republicans and four Democrats from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware debated for 90 minutes on WPHT-AM 1210, prodded by host Dom Giordano and questions from a hooting, skeptical audience at the Inquirer building in Center City.

President Obama has made changing the health-care system a priority of his administration, though opposition has been growing to some of the proposals he and congressional allies have advanced.

"People say the public option is a government takeover of health care - that's nonsense, it's a lie," Rep. Chaka Fattah (D., Pa.) said, defending the concept of a public insurance plan to compete with private carriers, contained in a pending House bill. He said it would drive down costs and reach uninsured Americans.

Former Rep. Pat Toomey, a Pennsylvania Republican who is running for U.S. Senate, said the proposed public plan would increase the "staggering amount of our kids' money" that the federal government is already spending, while driving customers away from private insurers because a government plan can undercut them. That, he said, is a "huge unfair competitive advantage" for government.

Audience members shouted down Rep. Joe Sestak (D., Pa.) when he tried to explain that the House legislation would require a government-run insurance plan to reimburse hospitals and doctors at competitive rates, and it also would prohibit private employers from dumping their covered workers into the public plan.

Sestak is challenging Sen. Arlen Specter (D., Pa.) for the party's nomination in next year's elections. Specter was not present, but in a taped interview expressed support for a public plan. "There ought to be some competition, and the public option would provide that," Specter said.

"If you go to the University of Penn it's going to cost you \$5,000 to \$6,000 more than to go to Penn State or Temple," Fattah said. "It didn't put the private universities out of business." Addressing the crowd, he added: "I know y'all want to deal with this imaginary foolishness, but let's deal with the facts."

As at other town-hall meetings that have rocked members of Congress this summer, audience members argued that provisions in the bill requiring analysis of the relative effectiveness of medical treatments would lead to government rationing of health care.

"What worries me is this group of bureaucrats is going to insert itself between doctor and patient," said Toomey, who often was cheered by the conservative-leaning crowd.

At least one speaker alluded to the widely debunked "death panels" that opponents say would be set up to decide who deserves lifesaving medical care.

"I got a little problem . . . because I don't really trust you," said Joey Vento, the owner of Geno's Steaks and a sponsor of the forum. He said he did not believe assurances that illegal immigrants would not be given free medical care under the plan.

"I believe the loss of faith and trust in our politicians is the greatest damage" in the health-care debate, Sestak said.

Said Rep. Mike Castle (R., Del.): "My sense is we need more time to understand this process. Health care affects every single person in this country, and it should be broken down so we can have a true discussion [instead] of people cherry-picking various things that are sensational on one side or another."

Rep. John Adler (D., N.J.) said that it was a shame there had been no action on a bipartisan bill that would allow small businesses to pool together and buy health insurance across state lines. He said it was a commonsense solution.

The House overhaul bill "has serious flaws," Adler said, adding that the key thing was to figure out ways of controlling costs. "The American people understand that the health-care system works for many people but has become too unaffordable for businesses and taxpayers. We need health-care reform, and we can't put it off for another . . . generation."

Rep. Jim Gerlach (R., Pa.) said there needed to be a "market-based approach" to remove barriers to competition among private health carriers. "We can't change the law of economics," he said.

As Rep. Bob Brady (D., Pa.) was explaining that his chief concern was getting health-care coverage for the uninsured, a man in the audience was yelling at him.

"You can holler at me, you're allowed," Brady said. "What did you say, sir?"

"Give us the same system you have!" he said, to cheers and applause.

"I'll go to the public option," Brady said. "Put me down for it."